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Three Centennials on Christian Liberty, 1918 – 2018
Gardner C. Taylor, Billy Graham & Aleksandre Solzhenitsyn
Dr. Ralph Blair's Centennials Lecture and his Three Sermons for the Occasion

“Liberty – therefore, Humility”

Among the ancient pagans, *humility* was *belittled*, even *loathed*, as a despicable defect. They did this, of course, to prop up *self-importance* that they really couldn't believe. So, their ruse made them nervous. They couldn't *really* believe that they *really* were so important *to others*. And, by the way, they weren't. The others were too obsessed with *their own* ideas that they, *themselves*, weren't important enough to be affirmed by others. They couldn't afford to distract themselves *from themselves*, even for *their own* good.

While, irrationally reading *their own unwanted experience* of *their own unimportance* into what they irrationally assumed *others* were thinking of *them*, they needed to *rationalize* their showing off that, of course, they, themselves, couldn't buy into.

But, hey, under the aegis of a socially subsidized discrediting of *humility*, they hoped they *might* get away with strutting for social approval. Yet, neither they nor the others ever did, or ever could, arrive at their desired destination by such a doomed route.

And, at any rate, if and when anyone else, tripping over his own sense of self, did buy into the braggart's boasts, he'd get jealous and try to escape this by ridiculing the braggart. So, nobody escaped his or her own enslavement through such a counterproductive, self-incarcerating self-centeredness.

They were selfishly captive to their own sense of self and their own desire for things to be otherwise as they defined otherwise. They were bound up in the bonds of their own making.

But, on their own, they could not get unbound, for their own solution was their folderol that they feared no one would fall for, for they, themselves, couldn't fall for it. And, if ever a second fool might foolishly impress himself with that first fool's fooling him, that first fool would have to be publicly put down.

What these pagans tried to use to cope with all of this, were but the two sides of a counterfeit coin of pretended pride and stigmatized humility. Thus, they were trapped in their never-ending cycles of spin.

But, with the revelation of the One True God's sovereign glory and amazing grace, proclaimed through the Hebrew scriptures and in the coming of Christ, as over against the competing and capricious gods and goddesses of paganism – *humanity* was finally freed to savor *humility* as a daily reminder of the genuine freedom so fully available in the only *loving* God, come in flesh and blood in Christ Jesus. *Humility* could then be understood as the absolutely appropriate and realistic response to the loving reality of the One and Only God, the universal Creator and the sovereign Redeemer, who *humbled* himself for all humanity, even in disgrace and death on a cross.

We can identify with the pagans, for we are their descendants. We carry their DNA – genetically, of course – but also morally, for we, too, are members of a *fallen* and *ever-rebellious* race. And yet, we are in some ways far worse than pagans, for we have heard the Good News of God's unmerited favor in the Christ of the cross. Yet, even in this light of the Gospel we've heard, we can still so easily resemble the pagans who never heard the Good News, and we can so

easily resemble the ancient Israelites in their disobedience, though they had heard much more than the pagans heard. Jesus warned that much is required from those to whom much is given. (Luke 12:48) That certainly does make sense, but it so seldom is paid any serious attention.

With further revelation in the lifetimes of the first Christians, Peter was moved to conclude one of his letters in these words: “Finally, all of you, be at peace with each other, having a loving concern for each other, being kind and *humble*.” (I Peter 3:8)

So *loved* and so *liberated*, they could afford to be kind and humble with each other. So *loved*, so *liberated to love*, in *honest humility*! By God’s amazing grace in Christ, what could be *more affordable* for us than to be humble and humbly to love one another as we are already loved to the uttermost at the greatest of all costs?

But, sadly, the insecure, the fearful, try to deny their experienced weakness and wrongs and can ill afford to let their self-doubts and anxieties show.

Jesus, with fullest confidence in his Father’s loving presence, could *fully afford to be meek and humble*. (Matt 11:29) Therefore, followers of Jesus, given the evidence of his sacrificial love and the evidence of the power of his vindicating resurrection, can fully afford to be meek and humble.

A Hebrew proverb explains that, “Pride ends in humiliation, while humility brings honor.” (Prov 29:23) That’s the *reality*. It’s the reality back there and then in all of those ancient worlds, and here and now, in our own corner of our world today. And it’s reality forevermore.

In the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament, what always leads to pride is a sense of falling short. What follows in pride’s wake is predictable, but, of course, unintended shame and even utter ruin. As all such pride is deliberately *posed*, over against the poser’s actual sense of *insufficiency*, the pose, itself, is a *sufficient clue* to the poser, that his effort is a lie. And right there, the resulting humiliation has begun.

Postured pride may, of course, fool *others*, at least for a while, but it *never* fools the poser. Yet, the fact that it doesn’t fool the poser is really a *gift* of God’s grace. Still, God’s good gift is so often ignored and suppressed. Aware of God’s grace by which we’re forgiven, can we not *afford* to humbly admit our sins to ourselves, for in admitting them to God, the reply is *forgiveness*.

People commonly pass the buck to others when there’s something *they, themselves*, should do but don’t *want* to do. It’s a *selfish* copout. But there’s one *self-assigned* assignment about which we seldom pass the buck. Indeed, it’s one of our most tempting *self-assignments*. Of so many things we *should* do, we *selfishly* say, “Let somebody else do it.” And we boast, “I do enough.” But there is something *else* we do often do on our own, and never leave it to others to do, for we think if we leave it to others it would never get done. We *boast about ourselves* for we can’t afford to wait around for *others* to get around to boasting about us. Yet, the biblical Proverb suggests: “Let somebody else do it.” (Prov 27:2)

Paul, in Christ, could, indeed, so fully afford, as he said, “never to boast, except in the [religiously despised embarrassment] of the *cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*, through which”, as he put it, “the world was crucified to me, and I to the world”. (Gal 6:14)

Solzhenitsyn, in a peasant’s parlance, remarked: “Pride grows in the human heart like lard on a pig.” And G. K. Chesterton keenly observed: “It is always the secure who are humble.” Quite! Indeed, in this sinful world, it’s *only* the *truly secure* in Christ who can readily afford to be humble.

Christians who appreciate what God has done for us in Christ, are humbly grateful for that solidly reliable security of spiritual liberation through the most radical grace of God. We can

experience a confidence in God that allows us to really rest in humility, rooted in this liberation by God's grace.

Only the truly *secure* can truly *afford* to be humble. The *insecure* sense a gnawing awareness of not being who they *should* be or who they're *pretending* to be. So, they *boast against* their *insecurity* and *against* their *sense* of self, and they angrily fault any and all *but* themselves. And, of course, this can't work. They can't help but see right through all of their busted bluster and all of the blundering blaming. And, thank God, for this grace that allows us to see right through all of this nonsense of ours.

Humility is not a *virtue* – as it's so often assumed to be. It's not an *assignment*. It's a *straightforward consequence* of a stable, realistic awareness of *true reality* and *reliable safety*. There's nothing *more real* and *more reliable* than God's amazing grace to fallen humanity. Grateful for our liberation in Christ, we can now easily afford to be truly humble. Sturdiest security allows us to humbly, honestly thrive in our standing *in Christ, not in ourselves*. Freed from self-centered distractions and anxiety we're afforded the *ability* to get on with *living lives* of service to *others*. No more "poor me" for folks so divinely privileged.

We're under the precious *gift* of the shed *blood* of the "Lamb, slain from the creation of the world", the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". (Rev 13:8; John 1:29)

And recall that, even all of those innocent lambs of the sacrifices in the Old Covenant were also *God's own lambs*. Those lambs, too, were the *gifts* of God.

Neither the ancient Hebrews nor Christians today *earn* forgiveness. Forgiveness was and is God's *gift*. Back in Leviticus, the Lord God made it quite clear: "*I myself* have given the blood of the lambs to you to make atonement for yourselves." (Lev 17:11)

The words of an old hymn that was synonymous with the altar calls at Billy Graham Crusades were these: "Just as I am without one plea, but that, Thy blood was shed for me, and that, *Thou* bid'st me come to *Thee*, O Lamb of God, I come." No postured pride here! No unbelievable boasts!

Two centuries before the Graham Crusades, folks were singing that same faith through Toplady's words, sung to the Lord: "Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee. ... Not the labors of my hands, can fulfill Thy law's demands; could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone; Thou must save, and Thou alone. Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling; naked, I come to Thee for dress, helpless, look to Thee for grace; foul, I to the Fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die."

The sophisticated, "the woke" as they boast of self these days, defensively disdain all of this: "What a downer!"; they say. Realists realize: "*What a truth!*"

The terms of these honest old hymns, rooted in the Scripture, are not the boasts of the clueless, the self-pitying, the self-excusing, the self-righteous who, in blaming others, are so foolishly heralded today. The lines of these old hymns are the humble prayers of all who know, so honestly, so humbly, that they are, in and of themselves, utterly lost in selfishness and in need of the Savior. Here, there's no delusional effort to try to put God in our debt. There's simply a sober and humble acknowledgement of self-awareness – seeking mercy.

So, Paul, calling himself, "a prisoner of the Lord", wrote to his sisters and brothers in the Lord, fellow captives of the Lord, at Ephesus. He began yet again, with his typical, and so familiar, "therefore", *that adverb of consequence*, and here, again, it was *in consequence of our Lord's liberation of us*. "Therefore ... in meekness and in lowliness and in humility, bear with one another." (Eph 4:1ff) How could they *afford* to behave so contrary to the ways of this world? They could do so by following the Way marked out by the Way, Himself, their meek Lord, on

his road to Calvary. It led, through grief and pain and unimaginable death, to the glory of the resurrection and eternal life for a fallen, yet now redeemed, race.

This *life of humility*, of *living* and *vibrant* humility to which we're privileged to be called in Christ, is *ours in relationship* to our life and death *to ourselves* in that one, "who, being in his very nature, God, did not consider equality with God something to be used for *himself alone*; rather, he made himself to be as nothing by taking on the very nature of a slave, being made in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by being obedient to death, even to that horrible death on a cross." (Phil 2:6ff)

The more we grasp of the utterly unmerited favor of God – unmerited in terms of our own *self-centeredness*, but *not* unmerited in terms of Christ's *self-sacrifice* – the more it makes sense to respond to the Good News of God's grace with spontaneous humility. This humility equips us to let go of selfish distractions and get on with our *life in Christ* for the welfare of others. This humility enables us to escape our unendurable *isolation* in self-centeredness and defensive intolerance of others and to enjoy the *fellowship* of communion with Christ and our sisters and brothers in Christ. This humility enables us to get on with the privilege of living the life we're called to live each day as witnesses to all our world of the *inexpressibly* Good News of the written and the living Word of God. Amen.